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Trump's election and the "white working class":

What we missed

ABSTRACT

In the buildup to the extraordinarily divisive 2016 US presidential election, much discussion focused on an often-ignored group—the “white working class,” which was identified early on as a key constituency of Donald Trump. During the election, many pollsters and journalists defined *working class* as a group comprising people who lack a four-year college degree. This definition, however, lumps together an extraordinarily broad range of groups with diverse histories as well as social and class positionings, contributing to confused media discussion around class during the election. Unpacking what this definition masks is critical to understanding the changing class landscape of the United States and to promoting public discussion of the causes of growing inequality and its socially and politically destabilizing effects. [*class, whites, inequality, deindustrialization, presidential election, Rust Belt, United States*]

The most striking feature of the 2016 US presidential election was the appalling bigotry that Donald Trump's campaign unleashed. Also striking was how the election put economic insecurity at the center of US political discussion. While the centrality of such concerns may have surprised more affluent Americans in economically dynamic coastal regions, it followed decades of growing marginalization for others. The roots of increased economic insecurity as well as expanding inequality can be traced back to the economic and policy transformations of the 1970s and 1980s often referred to by academics as neoliberalism or “flexible accumulation” (Ganti 2014; Harvey 1989), while the 2008 financial crisis and its uneven long-term fallout eventually brought these issues to a head.

During the election, candidates offered competing interpretations of this changing class landscape in the United States: Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders castigated the dominant neoliberal policies and the influence of the wealthiest 1 percent, while conservatives countered that government regulation had stymied corporate CEOs as “job creators.” Trump added his own twist to the conservative interpretation by blaming immigrants and foreign nations for “stealing” US jobs, a move intended to fuel the resentment that Trump ultimately rode to the White House.

Much discussion during the election cycle focused on a group often ignored by pundits, the “white working class,” which was identified early on as a key constituency for Trump. Yet media discussions of social class throughout the election were often confused and contradictory. Part of the confusion stemmed from the overly broad definition of *working class* used by many journalists and pollsters, one that conflated different groups of whites with starkly different political, social, and economic histories and concerns (Metzgar 2016). As a result, there is a pressing need to untangle election commentary around class.

Contemporary election campaigns, in general, engage in a kind of demographic reductionism that depicts voters as demographic groups whose fears and biases are to be marketed to rather than as citizens to be engaged in civic debate (Vidart-Delgado 2016). Trump, the businessman, amplified this marketing angle to an unprecedented degree. Challenging such

reductionism is crucial to understanding the changing class landscape of the United States (and the other divisions with which it intersects) and to creating public discussion of the causes and effects of growing inequality.

Although expanding economic inequality has taken a particularly extreme form in the United States in comparison to many other wealthy countries, it is a global phenomenon.¹ Addressing increasingly extreme levels of inequality and their socially and politically destabilizing effects will remain one of the defining challenges of the era for academics and others as we move into politically unknown territory following both Trump's election and the rise of various European movements of "nationalist populism" (Gusterson 2017).

How the definition of *working class* shifted election narratives

Americans have often tended to avoid discussions of class and to largely self-define as "middle class" (Ortner 1991; Walley 2014). But this has become increasingly difficult to maintain after decades of rising inequality. According to some measures, US inequality has come to rival that of the 1920s or even the 1880s (*Economist* 2004). In 1965 the earnings of corporate CEOs were 20 times larger than an average worker's compensation; in 2013, they were 295 times larger (Davis and Mishal 2014). Meanwhile, the top 1 percent of US adults now make nearly three times as much as they did in 1980 (Piketty, Saez, and Zucman 2016).

"Class," however, is a notoriously fuzzy concept, and media coverage during the election only enhanced the confusion. Should social class be defined based on one's relation to the means of production, as classical political economists might argue? Should it be based on occupation, income, wealth, education, status, cultural capital, or family background? How are its economic dimensions linked to social, cultural, and historical ones? How is class in the United States (and elsewhere) bound up with projections onto others of our own hopes and fears about the future? And how do we often argue about class through discourses of race and gender even as class is co-constituted with them in complex ways (Bettie 2003; Dudley 1994; Hartigan 1999; Lacy 2007; Ortner 1991)?

In the US presidential election coverage, however, the dominant definition of *class* has been a crude one, based on a binary distinction between those who have—and do not have—a bachelor's degree (Metzgar 2016). This definition erases the "middle" by which many Americans have historically defined themselves. It is also misleading at both ends of the economic spectrum. At the upper end, it lumps together Occupy Wall Street's rhetorical 1 percent of the wealthiest Americans with, for example, elementary-school teachers, thereby shifting the discussion of economic "elites" to the presumed "cultural" differences

of the educated. At the other end, the category of the "less educated" (which includes those with some college education) lumps together middle-class office workers, small-business owners, and suburban dwellers with the traditional "working class" of industrial and former industrial regions, service workers, and the poor. This means that the 64 percent of non-Hispanic whites in the United States who lack a bachelor's degree were often referred to in election coverage as "working class" (US Census Bureau 2015).

While Trump made a strong bid for votes in industrial and postindustrial areas through promises to renegotiate trade deals and bring back manufacturing jobs, exit polls from the primaries showed that those who voted for him earned each year an average \$72,000, well above the US median yearly income of \$56,000 (though less than other Republican contenders), even as he won the suburban vote by 45 to 50 percent and the majority of college-educated white men in the general election (BBC News 2016; Sasson 2016; Silver 2016). Yet it went unremarked that the news media's descriptions of Trump supporters involved a continual slippage from white "non-college degree holders" to "working class." Did this slippage go unremarked because it reinforced assumptions among the "narrating class" that white working-class bigotry largely explained Trump's rise, as Jack Metzgar (2016) has argued? And did it distract attention from the severity of growing economic precarity while also downplaying the bigotry of middle-class Trump supporters, as well as the kinds of structural racism that benefit elites?

Disaggregating Trump voters

The limits of this definition of class are revealed when we compare two groups of Trump voters, both of which were labeled by many pollsters and pundits as "white working class": dislocated workers in the Rust Belt and more well-off conservatives in the South and elsewhere. The latter group has been recently studied by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016) and by Theda Skocpal and Vanessa Williamson (2013). Hochschild began her ethnographic research in the Lake Charles region of Louisiana, where she sought to go to the heart of new conservative movements in a location she saw as their "epicenter" in the South. Although her rural interlocutors were at first Tea Party advocates, by the end of her research, many of them had morphed into passionate Trump supporters. She described the Trump campaign as putting a flame to kindling.

Much of Hochschild's analysis resonates with the research of Skocpal and Williamson on grassroots Tea Party adherents across geographic locations. Many of their interlocutors were older whites who lived in segregated suburban and rural settings. Both studies suggest that while grassroots conservatives often expressed economic concerns, many were less likely to be economically

deprived than afraid of "falling" in class terms (Ehrenreich 1990). Tellingly, Hochschild interviewed equal numbers of college- and non-college-educated people, making half her interlocutors part of the demographic category of white "working class" as defined in contemporary media accounts. Like some Trump supporters, many were worried that their tax dollars were being used to support the "undeserving" (sometimes including their own family members and neighbors).

Most crucial is Hochschild's recognition of the historically specific nature of what evolved into support for Trump. Although the white people with whom Hochschild worked had been southern Democrats in the pre-civil-rights era, they were now largely self-defined conservatives with a sense of identity bound up for many with Cajun ethnicity, strong religious sensibilities, and a resentment about the perceived disdain of coastal liberals. Ironically, the desire to roll back government stemmed in part from a weak and corrupt Louisiana government, with its failures perceived as further reason to starve rather than support it.

Hochschild also notes a long history in the South of poor whites "identifying up" in class terms in a setting that was historically divided into slaves and wealthy plantation owners and that lacked the strong "middle-class" traditions found in some other regions. This tendency strengthened support for "pro-business" (if anti-Wall Street) Tea Partiers and for Donald Trump, and it has had profound ramifications as the expanding oil and gas industry transforms Louisiana. At the same time, however, some of Hochschild's interlocutors made comments that indicate their struggles with, and resentments over, contracting economic opportunity, lack of corporate accountability, and environmental degradation—concerns shared with many coastal liberals. Fox News, as a pervasive news source in the region, however, encouraged a particular set of readings of such issues.

Interlocutors in both Hochschild's and Skocpol and Williamson's studies deny charges of racism, which they defined as personal hatred, yet many were deeply skeptical about the existence of structural racism. And they often perceived President Obama as Other, as not a real American and probably a Muslim, symbolizing a changed America where interlocutors considered themselves increasingly and unfairly overlooked and, as Hochschild put it, "strangers in their own land." While not all of Hochschild's informants became Trump supporters, many did, and Trump rallies became almost a kind of religious revival event for affirming a white identity politics in a context of perceived national marginalization.

In contrast, the so-called midwestern Rust Belt states—including the Calumet region of southeast Chicago and northwest Indiana where I have conducted research for many years—include a very different group of white working-class voters (Boebel and Walley 2016; Walley 2009, 2013).² The Calumet is an old steel-mill region that in its



Figure 1. A highway exit leading to Chicago's former steel mill neighborhoods, 2013. (Chris Boebel) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

heyday after World War II employed 120,000 mostly male steelworkers (see Figure 1). The area has been home to many white (mainly Eastern European) immigrants, as well as large numbers of African Americans and Mexican Americans. The region came to be redefined as "middle class" based on rising steelworker wages from World War II to the 1970s. Historically, the Calumet was heavily unionized and solidly Democratic, and people were less inclined to "identify up" (although the upwardly mobile and college-educated children of ambitious immigrant families often did).

If the South has a particular history of racial formation, the Calumet region has its own historical lineage of deep-seated racial and ethnic hostility, one in which industry played a central role. Beginning in the 19th century, management regularly hired incoming ethnic and racial groups en masse and used them to break strikes or to undercut the wages of existing groups. In short, the exploitation of immigrant labor and existing labor went hand in hand.

Such tensions were at the heart of struggles within the labor movement, as the AFL and CIO historically battled over whether workers would make common cause across racial and ethnic divides or give in to resentments against incoming groups. In later years, as “swarthy” European immigrants assimilated to native “whiteness,” an assimilation that was denied to racial minorities, skin color also served as a perceived symbol of class status, contributing to the virulent racism that erupted in the civil-rights era over housing, neighborhoods, and jobs.

The steel mills largely closed in the 1980s and 1990s, and the few mills left in northwest Indiana are now highly automated and employ relatively few workers. Much of what remains of the old mills are massive brownfields, toxic and choked with weeds, that dominate the landscape, and many families have experienced downward mobility. The more upwardly mobile (mostly whites but also some African Americans) have relocated to lower-middle-class suburbs. In a region once known for the male “family wage,” married women often continued in, or re-entered, the workforce in service positions after the closing of the mills. Men faced a particularly difficult time finding work.

Although the “working class” is often stereotyped as comprising white male industrial workers, deindustrialization had profound effects on African Americans, women of a variety of backgrounds, and others in the region. African American men in particular were hard hit by industrial job loss and suffered the greatest decline in income as many parts of Chicago deindustrialized (Doussard, Peck, and Theodore 2009). Whites, however, have also been severely affected. Nationally, mortality rates for middle-aged US whites with a high-school education have risen alarmingly (Case and Deaton 2015). These “deaths of despair” have been linked to suicide, alcohol, and drug abuse, and appear to be related to increased economic vulnerability, trends also evident regionally after the Calumet mill closures, but not found in other wealthier countries experiencing deindustrialization, presumably because of stronger social-safety nets (Case and Deaton 2015; McGreal 2016; Walley 2013, 68).

In the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012, whites in the Calumet region supported Barack Obama despite the area’s history of racial animosity. In fact, Obama was first elected to the Illinois state senate from the district that includes southeast Chicago before he went on to become US senator and then president. Whereas the conservatives studied by Hochschild and by Skocpol and Williamson tended to view Obama as Other and define him in opposition to self and country, whites in the deindustrialized Calumet region responded well to Obama’s discursive appeal to “average folks,” even if many of them were later frustrated that he did not do enough for the “little guy.”

During the 2016 election cycle, journalists noted that in the midwestern Rust Belt, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, who both opposed international trade agreements, had strong support in their respective primaries. In historically Democratic southeast Chicago, white voters split almost evenly between Sanders and Clinton, with Sanders edging out Clinton to win this multiracial area with strong support from Latinos.³ (Sanders would lose the Illinois primary to Clinton by a mere 2 percent, virtually tie in Minnesota, and would win Michigan, Wisconsin, and Indiana.)

Although Clinton was supported by the United Steelworkers union in the general election, union membership is now far lower, and her husband’s NAFTA legacy dogged her. Nevertheless, Gallup polls in August 2016 showed that despite media narratives emphasizing Trump’s white working-class support, voters in manufacturing areas—in other words, the kinds of workers most stereotypically thought of as “working class”—were still *not*, at that stage, a predictor of Trump support (Maloy 2016). When I visited the Calumet region during the primaries, I was in fact surprised by the relative lack of discussion of Trump—a strong counterpoint to the ecstatic Trump support at rallies described by Hochschild. The few lawn signs I saw in southeast Chicago were for Sanders.

By the general election the situation had changed, presumably a product of Clinton’s neglect of the Rust Belt, Trump’s continuous wooing of deindustrialized regions, and some measure of hard-to-quantify effects like the FBI intervention in controversies over Clinton’s e-mail. In the general election, five of the Rust Belt states (as well as many working-class whites in southeast Chicago despite Clinton’s Illinois win) would vote for Trump, ensuring him the Electoral College victory even as Clinton won the popular vote. But how *far* did the Rust Belt flip? *Business Insider* disaggregated exit-poll data for the Midwest under the headline “Trump Didn’t Flip Rust Belt Voters—Clinton Lost Them,” noting that, while Democrats lost 950,000 white voters from 2012, in the five Rust Belt states that Trump won, Republicans gained only 450,000 additional voters. The rest stayed home or voted for someone other than the major-party candidates (Kilibarda and Roithmayr 2016).

The flipping of the Rust Belt simultaneously underscores three important phenomena: the centrality of economic concerns for many white voters, the “white privilege” of those who could register economic grievances by voting for Trump without having to fear the bigotry his campaign was unleashing, and the channeling of economic resentments against Others. Trump, like industrial managers of old, had split the diverse industrial and postindustrial working classes along ethnic and racial lines.

In sum, news coverage that lumped together an unusually wide variety of groups as “white working class,” including the two groups described above, contributed to

a demographic reductionism that distracted attention from other competing factors at play and from the multiple ways that class is constituted. Such reductionism also diverted attention from the kinds of broader anxieties found among some of Trump's core supporters. Often more lower-middle and middle-class in orientation, these supporters suggested a different kind of class positioning than those in the Rust Belt (Gusterson 2017). Such positioning might stem less from existing economic hardship and more from anxiety about the potential loss of upward mobility or from attraction to Trump's "prosperity gospel" style among those from modest origins living in increasingly precarious times. Missing entirely in such analyses were the more solidly middle and wealthy suburban voters who would also cast their votes for Trump.

Facing growing precarity

In recent decades, a mountain of academic and popular books have explored the increasingly extreme nature of expanding inequality, the stagnation of middle-class incomes, and the staggering percentage of wealth owned by a small elite in the United States (and beyond). In regions like the Calumet, the hemorrhaging of jobs has continued. The number of manufacturing jobs has continued to decline in part because of automation and many jobs are now nonunion or based on temporary contracts (Doussard et al. 2009; Grabel 2013; Muro and Kulkarni 2016). Indeed, 40 percent of Americans now have "contract" jobs (Pofeldt 2015), while there has been a massive trend toward "fissured" workplaces in which employment is outsourced in ways that decrease employers' accountability to their employees (Weil 2014).

In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Guy Standing (2011) argued that we need to rethink class for the 21st century. Existing classes are realigning, Standing argues, not simply because of educational inequality (as pollsters would have it) but because of increased insecurity and an inability for precarious workers to envision a viable future path. Thus, the resentments born of insecurity can turn affected groups against one another and make them vulnerable to neofascist demagogues, a trend frighteningly borne out in this election. Given the increasing precarity of even the well-educated middle classes, the Rust Belt might not be a disappearing vestige of a past economy, as many presumed, but a distressing harbinger of the future.

Even though Trump managed to be elected in part because he could market himself to white voters' economic insecurities, marketing is not the same as governing. As Trump nominates to his cabinet fellow (mostly white male) billionaires, Goldman Sachs bankers, and a labor secretary opposed to labor, it is impossible to conceive of any outcome other than the further unleashing of an even more brutal form of capitalism coupled with truncated

democracy. Winning the war of interpretation over growing economic inequality requires a resurgence of civic debate that links such inequality back to its origins in neoliberal ideology and policies. Doing so depends on countering the hatred and divisiveness Trump has fostered by working across racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and other lines, as many progressives suggest, in order to create an explicitly multiracial form of class politics. Addressing the social fallout of expanding inequality and its uneven effects across such lines of difference is critical to addressing the instabilities on which the 2016 US presidential election fed and that are—and will be—radically multiplying in its wake.

Notes

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1. Thomas Piketty's (2014, 24) highly publicized work on global inequality notes that there was a spectacular rise in top managerial pay in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Britain. The increase was considerably less drastic in other European nations. Inequality linked to deindustrialization and expanding finance capitalism also played a key role in the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum, discussed elsewhere in this *AE* Forum (Evans 2017; Koch 2017; see also Ramesh 2011).

2. Because of its pervasiveness in election coverage, I use the term *Rust Belt* to refer to deindustrialized areas of the midwestern United States, despite its sometimes-pejorative connotations.

3. The discussion of voting patterns in southeast Chicago is based on analysis of 10th Ward precinct information adjusted for percentages of white, Latino, and African American residents. Tellingly, in 2016 working-class whites appeared to vote 8–10 percent higher for a Thai American woman, US senatorial candidate Tammy Duckworth, than Hillary Clinton.

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